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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how feelings of self-hatred in African Americans are perpetuated through media and the standard physical and ideological manifestations of Christianity. The notion that skin that is closer to white and hair that is closer to white are both more desirable attributes is a dominant theme underlying the African American experience. The implications of such a notion (being African American is unattractive) cannot survive as a singular pejorative idea; it must be reinforced from every possible social milieu. Yet most African Americans deny or are at least unaware on a conscious level of the impact of their perceptions of these phenomena on the formulation of their self-image. The consequences of such pervasive beliefs erects a social, psychological, and cultural construct which leads African Americans to believe they are inferior by virtue of their birth. Examples include: (1) in film and music videos, the concept of the white female as more desirable is perpetuated, so that African American women spend millions of dollars each year on products to make them look like white women; (2) in a study of four-year old African American girls, researchers found that there was a clear majority preference for white dolls; (3) African American comedy as evidenced on television is also replete with self-deprecation and with black audiences who laugh at it; (4) feelings of self-hatred perpetuated and ensconced in the standard physical and ideological manifestations of Christianity, through images of a white God. Until racially biased images are eliminated, the notion that all humans are not equal will persist. (AEF)

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# Light Skinned With Good Hair: The Role Of The Media And Christianity In The Maintenance Of Self-Hatred In African Americans

by Omowale Akintunde

## Abstract

Most African Americans deny or are at least unaware on a conscious level of the impact of the media and Christianity on the formulation of their self-image. The phrase "light-skinned with good hair" is still commonplace within the African American vernacular. What is particularly remarkable about this reality is the lack of recognition of this cultural phenomenon as indication of a deep, subliminally anchored self-hatred. This paper explores how feelings of self-hatred in African Americans are perpetuated through media and the standard physical and ideological manifestations of Christianity.

### Light-Skin, Good Hair: What's The Media Got To Do With It

There has been little attention paid to the politics of hair texture and skin color within the context of the African-American Experience. Most African Americans deny or are at least unaware on a conscious level of the impact of their perceptions of these phenomena on the formulation of their self-image. The phrase "light-skinned with good hair" is still commonplace within the African American vernacular. What is particularly remarkable about this reality is the lack of recognition of this cultural phenomenon as indication of a deep, subliminally anchored self-hatred.

This, however, is not to lay blame on African Americans. These perceptions are born out of the oppressive state in which African Americans are forced to live and as with any society based on an oppressor-oppressed relationship, the oppressed are not to be blamed for their own oppression. The self-hatred as expressed through African Americans' obsession and affirmation of "light skin" and "good hair" is a reaction to racism. Thus, this and similar conditions are best characterized as "racist-reactionist phenomena." These phenomena though directly resultant from overt racism are now perpetuated through other conduits such as the media.

Given the preponderance of media images and racist dogma that continually portray the skin and hair of African Americans as ugly and unattractive, it is no wonder that African

Americans have such a low perception of themselves. On the surface, the import of such a basic acceptance of a group of people is not evident—not even to themselves. Because the natural hair and darker complexions of African Americans are in and of themselves considered unattractive, the resultant psychology and social attitude are that *being an African American is unattractive*. Conversely, since light skin and straight hair are considered in and of themselves attractive attributes, the resultant psychology and social attitude is that *being white is attractive*.

The consequences of such pervasive beliefs erects a terrifying social, psychological, and cultural construct which leads African Americans to believe that they are inferior by virtue of their birth status and European Americans to falsely believe that they are superior by virtue of theirs. These feelings, constructs, and social interactions are not always conscious and deliberate. In most all instances they are so deeply entrenched in the very fibers of our psyches that it is impossible to be aware of when and how these inclinations manifest themselves. A few minutes of video-watching on BET (Black Entertainment Television) will clearly demonstrate what I mean.

Here, one may view hour after hour of self-hatred conditioning. Light-complexioned African American women with long (often synthetic) hair writhe suggestively in scant attire. These light-skinned, long hair "beauties" are often depicted as objects of

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desire for African American men, while the African American men themselves are often depicted as the embodiment of White sexual fantasy: black, bald, muscle-bound, and virile. While this depiction appears the antithesis of the light-skinned with good hair syndrome, it is not. In depicting only light skinned, long-haired African American women as desirable to African American men, these attributes are reaffirmed. To apply the concept of light-skin with good hair as attractive attributes of African American men as the norm is contrary to the historical image of African American men as brainless, animal-like, studs whose ultimate desire is the acquisition and deflowering of the White female for whom these attributes are the norm.

This concept of the "black buck" whose sole life endeavor is "having a white woman" has been a popular visual media image since the inception of the form. D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation," one of America's earliest film productions, clearly illustrates this cultural view. In one segment of this film, a white woman is pursued relentlessly by an African American male (actually played by a white actor in "black face"). As the woman runs desperately through a forest, she finds herself at a cliff. Her pursuer approaching her from the rear, she is faced with a horrible dilemma: stand there at the edge of the cliff and await the "dehumanization" of being "taken" by the African American male or jump off the cliff. Of course, given the "catch-22" of such a situation she decides death is preferable.

Contemporary Rhythm and Blues and Rap videos are merely a variation upon these themes. Since African American men engaging in romantic liaisons with white women is still taboo in the film world, the next best thing will have to do: He pursues the African American woman who appears white. Video after video reinforces this notion. An excellent example is the Melvin Riley video "Whose is It?" In this video, a shirtless, bald, black, Melvin Riley asks a very light complexioned woman with long hair over and over "whose is it?" We can see

variations of this same theme with other noted African American male performers. The Bill Cosby Show is also a prime example of this phenomenon. In this situation comedy, Bill Cosby, a dark African American male is married to a light skinned woman with long, straight hair. All of the daughters have these same attributes. However, the other black male in the family, the son, is dark like the father.

Of course African American men and women both suffer tremendously from such images but perhaps the African American female suffers even more. For in addition to being portrayed as being beautiful only when she is light complexioned with long hair she is also made to suffer the woes of sexism. In such videos she is reduced not only to being a facsimile of herself but also a sexual object. Given the preponderance of such images and accepted attitudes about ourselves, it is a wonder that African Americans prosper at all. One may only say that the fact that African Americans are surviving is an undeniable indication of their tenacity.

More important than the fact of media depiction of African Americans as desiring to be Europeans, is the horrible side effects of such an inclination. Most African American women will straighten their hair their entire lives without ever allowing it to revert back to its natural state. Hair in the natural state is considered "nappy" and most undesirable. Contrast this to the social perception of white women whose hair is considered beautiful in its natural state which is straight. It then becomes clear why African American women spend millions of dollars each year on products to make them look like white women naturally. One can easily see how such thinly-veiled self hatred can only yield devastating results. In rejecting that which is natural to you is to reject one's self. There is a subliminal message here: You are naturally ugly.

Contrast this with the psyche of white women. White women may wake up in the morning knowing that their hair is beautiful as it is. The hair need only be styled--not

"fixed." Add to that the fact that millions of African American women spend millions of dollars a year to have hair that looks like yours. There is a subliminal message here, too: You are naturally beautiful. There is no way that persons engaged in such a syndrome can be considered of healthy mind. For such a syndrome sets up a negative self-image for the African American woman and a false sense of self for the European American woman.

The Clark Doll Study is clear illustration that the syndrome of self-hatred in African American women starts at an early age. In this study of four-year old African American girls, the researchers found that there was a clear majority preference for white dolls. One only need look in a classroom of African American elementary children to see this phenomenon in effect. If one were to do so, you would see young pre-teen girls with straightened hair and even hair additions. How can we expect healthy adult psyches to result when at a such an early age it is being communicated to you that you are naturally ugly. This is further important in that it illustrates how African Americans are contributing to their own self-hatred which is a necessary component of oppression.

The African American male contributes equally to this phenomenon in that such attributes in African American women are his expectation. One student that I worked with at the University of Missouri, who himself is very dark complexioned, defended his attraction to only white or light complexioned women in that he wanted to have "pretty" babies. The media unequivocally supports such notions. In addition to ads for products that straighten the hair for adult African American females such as "Bone Strait" and "Dark and Lovely" are ads pushing hair-straightening products targeted directly at African American children. One such product is "Just for You." In one ad for this product, a young African American girl is pictured with an adult African American woman, both with long, straight hair. They are both smiling, obviously proud of the fact that their "nappy"

hair is now straight. The young girl in this ad is smiling very broadly seemingly especially content that there is a hair straightening product "just for her."

Ironically, such ads are quite prominent in African American publications and during television shows that are targeted to the African American population. Since Madam C. J. Walker, who became the first African American woman millionaire with the invention of the straightening comb, there have been many other African American companies and entrepreneurs who have made quite lucrative livings selling such products of self-hatred to themselves.

Because African Americans harbor such a deep resentment of themselves and because this self-hatred is so deeply enmeshed within the very fabric of their consciousness, they unknowingly perpetuate the very conditions which oppress them. It is my contention that because of this deeply entrenched self-hatred that the liberation of African Americans is not eminent because in order for a people to attain liberation they must first feel worthy of such liberation. In short, you must first love yourself. We must ask ourselves why it is that for most African Americans Robin Givens is beautiful and Whoopi Goldberg is not. We must seek to understand how the light-skinned, good hair syndrome causes African Americans to disenfranchise other African Americans and dissipates the unity that is necessary for the liberation of African peoples.

Videos are not the only medium through which self-hatred in African Americans is perpetuated. "Def Comedy Jam," a popular HBO comedy show, is a prime example. Week after week African American comedians come out and tell jokes reeking of self-hatred to a mostly African American audience who guffaw uncontrollably. The comedians often address the audience directly with quips like "Nigger you so black, for a minute I thought your seat was empty" or "Man, you so black you would leave a fingerprint on charcoal." Not only do the audience members not find these "jokes" offensive, they, too, revel in the laughter. In

one episode a comedian pointed to one female African American wearing her hair naturally and quipped, "Your hair so short, I can see your thoughts!" More laughter.

Ironically, even the African American women who try desperately to live up to this African American male beauty expectation of long, straight hair fare no better. Weave and extension jokes are also par for the course. In another episode one comedian targeted an African American female in the audience with long, artificial hair and joked, "I bet ain't a horse in Central Park got a tail tonight." Thus a vicious cycle is in place here where the African American male expects the African American female to look like a white woman who in turn uses every cosmetic deception to realize this expectation and is then demeaned for the artificiality of her looks. On the other hand, the African American female who opts for her own natural beauty is also ridiculed mercilessly.

Another HBO comedy show, "Snaps!" made no attempts to be anything other than a vehicle of self-hatred. Here teams of African Americans went center stage and said the most derogatory things that they could to each other. Of course "You so black..." jokes were rampant. The person who derided the opponent best received "snaps" (scoring points) and the derided opponent was eliminated. This continued until the most despicable put-down of African Americans imaginable had been spoken and all of one team was eliminated. The remaining African Americans were declared "the winners."

Of course, capitalism plays a role here, too. Many African Americans will defend such horrid shows as the aforementioned as vehicles to stardom for African American entertainers. Here the age-old American concept that money, that is, slips of papers with pictures of former white male slave-owners, is reason enough to perpetuate your own oppression, rears its ugly head. This propensity was illustrated best during the Montgomery Bus Boycott of the 1950's. While most African Americans are pride-filled with the thought that African-

Americans banded together to demand their right to equal citizenry, most are unaware of the contingents of African-Americans who had to patrol the bus stops daily often having to physically assault other African Americans to prevent them from boarding the buses. Their reason for having to board the bus: money. It seemed survival for the moment for some was more attractive than life-long liberation and the assurance of a better life for their offspring.

Because one frail woman refused to be treated as second-class citizenry, despite the economic woes it must have caused her, all African Americans have earned that right. That is short term sacrifice for long term gratification. No one seems to remember these events now. Ironically, it was a Whoopi Goldberg movie, "The Long Walk Home," which illustrates these events from the perspective I have presented. In the film she portrays a maid who got up very early in the morning to walk to work because she refused to support a system that oppressed her. Her own family was very poor while the white people for whom she worked were quite well off. At the beginning of the boycott, her boss' wife, played by Sissy Spacek, would drive her to work each morning. But even after she stopped driving her, she continued to walk.

In this instance the media provided us with a powerful message: not even money can compensate for oppression. If African Americans in that era had given in to economic pressures we would still be riding on the back of the bus. And so I ask, "Would it have been worth it to ride the bus and we still be in the same social and economic status of African Americans in the 1950's?"

### **Light Skin, Good Hair: What's Good Got To Do With It**

Feelings of self-hatred in African Americans are perpetuated and ensconced in the standard physical and ideological manifestations of Christianity. Statues of white men on crosses depicted as Christ, the "saviour" are, for example, commonplace in

the African American Christian church. A great many African Americans gather frequently to kneel before such images and pray for salvation. Children are taught mythological tales in storybooks illustrated with all white characters: angels, saints, and even the mother of Christ herself.

On a superficial level the contribution of the aforementioned practices to the destruction of the African American psyche and their subjection to subsequent unrelenting oppression may not be immediately apparent. However, when one begins to understand the operative psychology behind the worship of images contrary to one's own attributes and additionally takes into account the historical oppression of African people in America based on the very Christian-Judeo doctrine from which they seek "salvation," the detriment not only should become apparent but ruefully despised for its cunning and contradiction.

One might argue that God is "colorless." That is, that he is exempt from any of the social stigmas, stereotypes, and negative social connotations that we as a society have come to regard as concomitant with human existence. But it is this very assertion that God is colorless that supports the very argument which purports itself to be the antithesis of racist dogma and oppression. If color or race were not an important consideration in the practice of Christian indoctrination why is it even important to establish God's freedom from such a system of thought or ideology? The reason is clear: Race is important to the acceptance of Christianity as the basis for human experience.

If religion were only an ideological practice as it is sometimes professed to be then how the image of God or Christ, the son of God, is manifested in reality would be unnecessary or at least insignificant. Thus individuals would be free to construct for themselves what the physicalization of God would be. It is also important to note that when we speak of God, we are speaking concurrently of Christ and the Holy Ghost as in Christian

dogma they comprise the "Holy Trinity" and are to be considered and conceived of as one. This is important because if one were to argue that our culture offers a physical representation of Christ but not God himself, this argument must be countered with the charge that it is Christian doctrine which clearly states that God and Christ are the same.

On another level, one might counter the argument in genetic terms. If Jesus is portrayed in our culture as a white man and the mother who gave birth (but not humanly conceived) him is also a white woman, is it really such a leap then to extrapolate from this that God himself is a white man. Of course, deeply entangled in this kind of dogma is a very sexist stance also. God of course is a man. He is God the Father. Also important is that his first born and only child is a male child. Since in Christian doctrine most often women are portrayed as despicable sexual beings who by virtue of their inherent prodigious animal-like sexuality have corrupted men and because of that sexuality have posited themselves as the very obstacle to male chastity, the conception of Christ had to be through non-sexual means. How could God himself fall for the temptations of woman who has caused the failure of mortal men. Consider the following biblical scriptures:

*"And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept, and he took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh instead thereof. And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man." Genesis 3:22,23*

*"Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply the sorrow and thy conception in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children, and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam he said, Because thou has hardened unto the voice of thy wife, and has eaten of the tree, of which I*

*commanded thee saying, Thou shalt not eat of it cursed is the ground for thy sake, in sorrow shalt thou eat all the days of thy life".*

Thus according to Christian biblical doctrine not only is woman the cause of the fall of "mankind", she is robbed of her role of generator of human life. Christian dogma would have us to believe that humankind originated from the "collaboration" of two white men. No. God cannot copulate. This humanizes him and causes him to be victim to the female sexuality that has corrupted males from the beginning. This image of woman as being the species responsible for the whole notion of human suffering must remain sacrosanct. And please note that woman the species is responsible according to such dogma--not Eve the person. For to regard this as an act of an individual would be to undermine the motive in this scenario which is to paint women as a whole as evil, sexual beings who corrupt men that would otherwise be "Godly."

It has been my experience that many African Americans who are devout in their belief in Christianity, when confronted with these issues of the involvement of worshipping white male images as God, respond by saying that the physical depiction of Christ in our culture is not relevant. This is an assertion that for me transcends logic. Endemic to Christian ideology is the understanding that God created man in his own image:

*"And God said, Let us make man in our own image. So God created man in his image. In the image of God created he him" Genesis 2: 26, 27*

This is an issue of some importance. For again, if Christ and God are one then the physical depiction of Christ in a racist society bears heavy implications. Race matters.

These same African American Christians who claim that the depiction of Christ in society is irrelevant often attend churches where "biblical" scenes in stained church glass windows depict the events only with

Europeans. The illustrations in their treasured bibles depict Christ and all of his contemporaries (even in Egypt) as being Europeans. Many have Michael Angelo's depiction of Christ prominently displayed on the walls of their homes. The April 8, 1996 cover of Life magazine was of a blonde, European male, as Christ. Black Catholics regard the pope, a white European male, as being God's liaison to common humans. Now, I say, how can you expect a people whose belief in Christianity is the anchor in their lives to escape this cycle of self-hatred, victimization, and oppression when they worship the very force that enslaves them.

Thus, in physicalizing Christ in a human image certain belief structures are inherent. God is a white man. The preceding cancels out two very broad groups: people of color and women. Thus the oppression of such groups become not only justifiable but a Christian duty. I bring in the issue of sexism not to confuse but to clearly illustrate the commonality of oppression through Christian dogma and biblical depictions and how the inability to see this connection helps to perpetuate the oppression of the disenfranchised regardless of the determined "affliction."

Endemic to this syndrome is people's refusal to recognize the commonality of oppressions. Hence, not only are there oppressed people in the world, oppressed people are oppressing each other! When Colin Powell supported the ban of gays in the military, I gasped with horror. He, a black man. Obviously he saw no connection between his oppression as a black and the oppression of gays. What oppressed people must come to understand is that in oppressing others they are fueling that very force which oppresses them.

For oppression is one thing. It is not a multiplicitous entity which manifests autonomous selves. It is a singular entity. No practice of it is excusable nor more heinous than the other. To be a bitch, a nigger, a fag is the same thing. We live in a society in which being White, male, rich, heterosexual and Christian are the supreme

attributes of human actualization. Consequently, all who lack one or more of these attributes is relegated to a diminished role in society.

Within these same African American communities where such devout worship of white men as God is commonplace, are remnants of other expressions of self-hatred. Some deeply entrenched and psychological while others are clearly articulated verbally and in other overt ways. St. Thomas Aquinas said "The quality of being the image of God is co-essential to man because it is one with the rationality of his nature (Gilson, 1957). Race matters.

### Summary

Terms such as "light-skin" and "good hair" are still very much common in the jargon of African-Americans. The notion that skin that is closer to white and hair that is closer to white are both more desirable attributes are still quite dominant themes in the African-American experience. That such ideology is symptomatic of the deeply entrenched self-hatred in African-Americans is secondary to the resultant, multiplicitous, negative side-effects of such psyches.

Such a notion of light skin and good hair cannot function as a singular pejorative idea. It must be reinforced from every possible social milieu. Supreme among these is the notion of how an oppressed people conceive of their god. Central to Christian dogma is the concept of Jesus as the son of God. Thus Jesus cannot be regarded as black with "nappy" hair by African-Americans. To look so would be to mean that his father, God, is black. And if he is black he's oppressed. Certainly, we cannot pray to an oppressed god. That would be useless. Those who are like me are as powerless as I am. No, we must pray to our oppressor for freedom--for deliverance from oppression. Jesus, the son of God, is a white man. He is a part of the power structure. From him it is possible to attain salvation. And because we believe that God is white we ourselves are demeaned

in stature. For it becomes impossible to think of God in our own image.

This notion is clearly evidenced, reinforced, and communicated through common epitaphs in the African-American community such as "a nigger ain't shit" and "niggers and flies, I do despise." What is further ironic of this Christian syndrome of self-hatred and domination is that African Americans have become not only the victims but also the perpetrators of their own social and psychological oppression.

I am not asserting that African Americans are responsible for their own oppression. I am not asserting that these notions of self-hatred and white male worship are originated by African-Americans in an attempt to subjugate themselves. These are all "racist-reactionist" phenomena resulting from centuries of physical and psychological rape. However, despite this understanding the results are no less devastating.

Again, we must not hold responsible African Americans for the creation of such ills among them. I also understand the bitter protest with which my arguments will be initially met. One cannot undo such demonic racist machinations with a simple untying of a knot. There must be a radical deconstruction of the slave mentality with which African Americans have been burdened and a complete re-education. It will not be easy to show a people how the white Christ that they proclaim as savior is the primary nemesis in their oppression. Brainwashing and the strong binding of socialization are nearly insurmountable constructs. Self-hatred and oppression has been induced and is maintained through Christianity.

One of the ways in which we are maintained in oppression is through the assertion that there are races in the first place. For in order to have racism we must have race. "The existence of races in a given society presupposes the presence of racism, for without racism, physical characteristics are devoid of social significance. It is not the presence of objective physical differences between

groups that creates race, but the social recognition of such differences as socially significant or relevant (van den Berghe, 1967)." It is important that we are forever led to believe that there are races. This is necessary before one may begin to assert that there are innate differences amongst these races that justify the superiority of one to the other. This must be made to be despite any very obvious evidence to the contrary. It is clear that there is no genetic, biological, or anthropological, support to any such reality as "race." It is purely a mental practice. It is here solely to justify oppression and the advancement of the white male capitalist ideal. The concept of race is a portentous, iniquitous, socially-contrived construct rooted in fictitious ideology.

Liem and Montague (1985) state "A theory of racism is merely theory. Clearly it will take a mass movement to abolish racism. Yet anti-racists have struggled for so long as 'Black' activists or 'White' activists, each with their own 'separate but equal' roles, that to posit the racial distinction, itself, as an object of struggle, as a 'racist' distinction born of the pre-human, 'civil', age of humankind, must be regarded as an advance in strategy as well as in theory."

Such rhetoric as I have presented in the assertion that racial categorization is a psycho-social construct is not to deny that there are physical differences between people but rather to explain that such differences become incidental to a race argument only in retrospect. "The reification of racial categories into skin color, [eye shape, lip size, hair texture,] etc. is an integral part of the racial logic, and a careful critique of it will show us, for instance, the historical specificity of racism. Simply put, racial categories are social distinctions devised in such a way that their differential moment can be left to a 'superstitious' conception of nature. This engenders the illusion that nature itself has dictated racial categories for us (Chang, 1986)."

The devastating effects of white supremacist ideology on the psyche and self-concept of African Americans as perpetuated

through the media and the tenets of Christianity have been profound. Thus it becomes incumbent upon us to eliminate racially-biased images from all vestiges of our culture. Until such efforts are made we will continue to consciously and subconsciously promote the notion that all humans are not equal and in so doing prevent our society from being a positive place for all the world's citizens.

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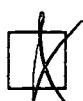


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